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ABSTRACT

Although anecdotal material suggests that parenting changes people, experimental tests in this area are lacking. Undergraduates (N=139) and their same-sex parents read one of eight summaries of parent-child interactions which varied in terms of success and in terms of the sex of the story character. Descriptions were reduced to three parent factors (Generous, Lost, and Masculine) and four child factors (Troubled, Responsible, Selfish, and Warm). The older generation used the factor, "Lost," less often than their children in describing the story parent; "Lost" was used more often to describe a mother than a father. The story child was described as more troubled, more responsible, less selfish, and less warm by the older generation than by their own children. Although the results were unclear as to whether generational differences were due to age, parenting, or cohort group differences, the data suggest that individuals over age 35 had a less conventional view of parents and children. The older generation showed signs of greater tolerance and more capacity for ambiguity. (NRB)

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GENERATION DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN

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GENERATION DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN

In the literature on adult development, one major theme has been the emergence of a post-conventional view around the time of the so-called deadline decade between 35 and 45 (Rosenzweig, 1973; Levinson et al, 1974; Sheehy, 1976). Peck (1968) considers middle age to be a time when an increase in both "cathectic flexibility' and "mental flexibility" is possible. Both McBride (1973) and Gutmann (1975) see parenthood as a key to the development of post-conventional views, though they disagree sharply in the importance that they attach to role divisions in the early years of parenting. While there is anecdotal material suggesting that parenting changes you (Steinberg, 1972; McBride, 1976), this study was designed because of the lack of experimental tests of these assumptions.

Procedures

One hundred thirty-six female and 136 male undergraduates without parenting experience were randomly assigned one of eight summaries of parent-child interactions, 4 successful and 4 unsuccessful, which were further varied in terms of the sex of each of the principals. Of the 208 undergraduates who were willing to send the same parent-child story that they had read home to their same-sex parents, 87 mothers and 52 fathers returned the questionnaire. This study compares the responses of 139 undergraduates whose mean age was 18.1 years, with those of their same-sex parents ($\underline{M}$=46.5 years). That is, a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 factorial between-subjects experiment was conducted with generation, sex of respondent, level of success, sex of stimulus parent, and sex of stimulus child as the independent variables.

The portrait of the successful parent emphasized the nurturant-authoritative qualities described by Baumrind (1967) as being characteristic of the parents of energetic-friendly preschoolers, while the

unsuccessful parent displayed the authoritarian-nonsupportive behaviors she linked with conflicted-irritable preschoolers. That the stories constructed to portray success or failure did do just that was demonstrated in pretesting. On a nine-point scale, pilot-study subjects awarded the successful parent an average rating of 8.33, while the unsuccessful parent received a rating of 2.09.

Factor analysis was used to reduce the 60 descriptors on which subjects rated both the stimulus parent and the stimulus child to their basic components. In the first solution, five parent and nine child factors emerged with eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1.0. A second factor analysis was then performed in the manner described by Child (1970) to limit the final solution to the number of factors which each accounted for 3.0% of the variance or more. Exact factor scores were then calculated for the resulting three parent and four child factors using a formula (Kim, 1975, p. 489) which includes a weighted term for each variable in the factor. Analysis of variance was performed on each of the resulting factor scores.

Results

The first parent factor was named Generous; generous, cheerful, enthusiastic, loving, affectionate, responsible, and understanding were the descriptors that loaded very highly on this factor. The second factor was designated Lost because lost, tense, gentle, disappointed, nervous, discontented, tired, and worried loaded especially highly on this factor. The third parent factor was called Masculine because that descriptor was most prominent in the composition of that factor, and feminine loaded very negatively on that factor.

Not surprisingly, parents seemed more Generous in the success story and more Lost in the failure story, and male parents were especially likely to be described as Masculine. As can be seen in Table 1, there were two

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Insert Table 1 about here

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other main effects for the factor Lost. The older generation made less use of that factor than did their own children. Lost was generally used more to describe a story mother than a story father. There were also three interaction effects in the use of Generous. Male respondents were more likely to describe the failing parent as Generous than were female respondents. A father interacting with a son was less likely to be seen as Generous than either father-daughter or mother-son/daughter combinations. Undergraduates reading a success story featuring a daughter were most likely to describe the story parent as Generous. There was an interaction effect in the use of Lost; parents in cross-sex parent-child stories were more likely to be described as Lost than were mother-daughter and father-son pairings. There were two interaction effects in the use of Masculine. Undergraduates were especially likely to describe the failing parent as Masculine; moreover, failure made a mother seem more Masculine and a father seem less Masculine.

The first child factor was named Troubled; troubled, frustrated, not happy, disappointed, and depressed were the descriptors that loaded very highly on this factor. The second factor was designated Responsible because responsible, sensible, understanding, efficient, and mature loaded especially highly on this factor. The third child factor was called Selfish because selfish, mean, inappropriate, and out of control were descriptors

that loaded very highly on this factor. Finally, the fourth factor was named Warm because warm loving, affectionate, enthusiastic, and creative loaded especially highly on this factor.

Children seemed more Troubled and Selfish in the failure story and more Responsible in the success story. As can be seen in Table 2, there

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Insert Table 2 about here

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were main effects for generation in the use of all four factors. The older generation described the story child as more Troubled and more Responsible than their own children did; however, they saw the story child as less Selfish and less Warm than their own children did. There were two main effects for sex of respondent. Females described the story child as both more Troubled and less Selfish than their male counterparts did. There was also a main effect for sex of child; story daughters were described as more Warm than sons were.

There also were three interaction effects in the use of Troubled. The older generation was more likely to view a child as Troubled in a failure story than their own children were. Across both generations, females reading a failure story were more likely to view the child as Troubled. Females in the older generation were especially likely to describe a story daughter as Troubled. Males reading of failure were especially likely to describe the story child as Selfish.

There were three interaction effects in the use of Warm. When there was a father in the failure story, the child was more apt to be seen as Warm than when there was a mother in the failure story. A father-daughter

interaction was more apt to lead to the child being described as Warm than any other parent-child pairing. Undergraduate females were especially likely to describe a story son as Warm.

Though it is not clear from this study whether the generation differences were due to age, parenting experience, or cohort group differences, the data suggest that those over 35 had a less "conventional" view of parents and children than their own children did. While becoming more dubious about the degree to which a child is Warm, those who already were parents were more likely to see a child, regardless of story, as Responsible, and to be more guarded in their use of the factor Selfish. The older generation was also more sensitive to the fact that a child might be Troubled. The findings are in keeping with Loevinger's milestones of ego development (1976, pp. 24-25), for the older generation showed signs of greater tolerance and more capacity for ambiguity.

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Table 1. F Values for Descriptions of Stimulus Parents -- F (1,229)

	Factor Labels		
	I	II	III
	Generous	Lost	Masculine
Percent of Variance Accounted for by Factor	60.0%	5.2%	3.2%
A (Generation)	1.930	7.595 **	2.583
B (Sex of Respondent)	1.369	.527	2.753
C (Level of Success)	283.571 ***	93.135 ***	.249
D (Sex of Stimulus Parent)	2.383	5.025 *	317.073 ***
E (Sex of Stimulus Child)	2.982	.971	.010
AB	.057	.017	.207
AC	.023	.013	9.607 **
AD	.020	.001	.699
AE	.136	1.419	.043
BC	5.198 *	.015	.853
BD	.051	.137	.077
BE	.074	.017	.008
CD	1.042	.001	18.466 ***
CE	.329	.112	.017
DE	8.433 **	8.018 **	.173
ABC	.000	.014	.026
ABD	.763	.566	.226
ABE	.039	.705	.028
ACD	.442	.056	.314
ACE	4.912 *	.339	1.531
ADE	.108	.211	.055
BCD	.733	.472	3.128
BCE	.379	.062	.202
BDE	.136	.004	.361
CDE	.647	1.566	.162

* $p < .03$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

NOTE: Four-way and five-way interactions are omitted because none of them were statistically significant. 278 cases were processed; 17 cases (6.1%) were missing data.

Table 2. F Values for Descriptions of Stimulus Child -- F (1,231)

	Factor Labels			
	I	II	III	IV
	Troubled	Responsible	Selfish	Warm
Percent of Variance Accounted for by Factor	31.5%	10.2%	4.2%	4.1%
A (Generation)	14.780 ***	15.736 ***	5.367 *	5.894 *
B (Sex of Respondent)	17.307 ***	.000	19.723 ***	3.727
C (Level of Success)	331.190 ***	24.670 ***	21.681 ***	1.193
D (Sex of Stimulus Parent)	.015	.064	3.859	1.206
E (Sex of Stimulus Child)	2.059	.240	.003	8.724 **
AB	.100	2.135	1.583	.212
AC	10.251 **	.128	.023	.323
AD	.000	2.458	.800	.013
AE	.004	.016	.002	.643
BC	13.397 ***	3.958	6.400 **	1.469
BD	1.541	2.014	.018	.624
BE	.346	.058	.575	.042
CD	2.626	3.731	1.484	10.664 ***
CE	.002	2.534	1.431	.282
DE	.276	.534	2.087	4.682 *
ABC	.093	1.011	.540	.025
ABD	.167	3.075	.038	.382
ABE	4.676 *	.490	.212	4.783 *
ACD	.049	.052	.576	.702
ACE	.207	.113	3.124	.873
ADE	.631	1.442	.404	.918
BCD	.044	1.182	.200	.619
BCE	.001	.069	1.023	.603
BDE	.216	.939	.731	1.702
CDE	1.294	4.120	.331	.000

* $p < .03$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

NOTE: Four-way and five-way interactions are omitted because none of them were statistically significant. 278 cases were processed; 15 cases (5.4%) were missing data.